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ABSTRACT

A close examination of the classics of western civilization reveals values that transcend any narrow definition and so absolve the classical tradition from the accusations leveled against it for being mere "representations" of the dominant culture. The classical tradition, with its values of individualism, freedom, and human dignity, has always, at its best, sought to affirm a wisdom that transcends race, gender, and nationality. Grove City College has initiated a revision of its core curriculum--a three-year sequence entitled the "Civilization Series" that guides every student through the great literary, philosophical, and religious works of western civilization and introduces them to other major world civilizations. New Historicism's diminishment of the classics to mere curiosities of a particular mindset of a particular time elevates the half truth of a work's historical context into the full truth about that work. Dante's use of Beatrice in "The Divine Comedy" is an example of the universal human need for symbols of the transcendent. In Homer are the seeds of what would later flower into a more universal sense of human dignity, freedom, equality, and rights. The Civilization Series at Grove City College recognizes the belief structure implicit in the great works of literature. The goal is unapologetically to elucidate that belief structure and to examine the best that has been thought or written in the West. Current curricular reforms must affirm the value of the classics that have given the world humanistic ideals it has recently come to cherish. (RS)

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TRANSCENDING DIFFERENCE: THE PLACE OF THE CLASSICS IN THE CURRICULUM OF THE '90S

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In the last two decades, the value of the so-called "classics" of Western Civilization has come under increasing fire, as has their place in the curricula of every level of American public education. The chant heard at Stanford University a few years ago: "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture's got to go!" has in one form or another echoed throughout the halls of every school in the U.S. The focus of the glib critique and easy dismissal of these classics has been the accusation that they are mere "representations" of the dominant culture, specifically the white, patriarchal, Eurocentric culture. Their selection as classics has only been at the expense of other equally valid literary works from groups oppressed by and excluded from the dominant culture. Hence, we have a moral obligation to perform corrective surgery on our inherited curricula to raise these oppressed voices from the obscurity into which our misguided forebears submerged them.

A closer examination of this classical tradition, however, reveals values that transcend such a narrow definition and so absolve the tradition from the accusations leveled against it in recent years. The classical tradition, with its values of individualism, freedom, and human dignity, has always, at its best, sought to affirm a wisdom that transcends race, gender, and nationality. It has gathered insights to inform this wisdom from a remarkably diverse range of sources; and the true classical tradition, at the heart of a truly liberal education, will continue to welcome such diversity in its ongoing quest for truth, wherever it may be found. Western Civilization has generalized Christ's

statement: "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free" to make it a kind of motto for liberal education.

The "truth," of course, is the crux of the matter. Pilate's question, "What is truth?" echoes through all the generations to the present. Who defines this "truth" and determines what shall contribute to our understanding of it? Is the "truth" as traditionally understood merely a "representation" of the white, patriarchal, Eurocentric culture? Or is the truth to any extent self-evident to all people in all places and times, transcending the differences that would divide humanity? Is there such a thing as "human nature" to which we can appeal in shaping our educational programs? Should not education be careful to nurture the essential human values of individualism, freedom, and human dignity in order to insure that they remain viable into the next generation?

This is, in fact, the thesis of C. S. Lewis' important book, The Abolition of Man. Lewis cites evidence from world religions and philosophy to illustrate "what is common to them all," what he calls the Tao, "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others are really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are" (29). Lewis later elaborates on the Tao:

> This thing which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new

> system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or (as they call them) 'ideologies,' all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess. . . . The rebellion of new ideologies against the Tao is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves. (56)

At Grove City College, we have recently initiated a major revision in our core curriculum, which we now entitle the Civilization Series. This is a three-year sequence that guides every student through the great literary, philosophical, and religious works of Western Civilization and introduces them to other major world civilizations. The goal, however, is unapologetically to emphasize those great ideas and values that have shaped the West and provided the entire world with benefits that transcend race, gender, and nationality -- the benefits of individualism, freedom, human dignity, and moral responsibility.

The primary concern of the new Civilization Series at Grove City College is to demonstrate that certain seminal ideas have had and continue to have a profound impact on Western Civilization, and that these ideas reflect an understanding of human nature that is universal. The idea of a universal human nature, of course, has come under fire recently from the radical critics of Western Civilization. The "human nature" which, they say, the West has foisted onto the rest of the world has contributed only to their subjugation and oppression. It is a "construct" designed to keep

white European males in power, a "construct" that needs therefore to be "deconstructed" to reveal the Machiavellian machinations behind it.

The New Historicism, for example, would diminish the classics to mere curiosities of a particular mindset of a particular time, place, and culture. This is fine as far as it goes, but it elevates the half truth of a work's historical context into the full truth about that work. Who would deny that Dante's use of Beatrice reflects a medieval European view of courtly love and a near idolatry of the chaste woman loved from afar? But the catch is in the word "mere" in the first sentence of this paragraph, with the suggestion that Dante's Beatrice is nothing more than the patriarchal Eurocentric schizoid view of women which honored women in the idealized abstract but suppressed them in the real world.

The further implication is that since we are, finally, freed from such an oppressive view of women, we can learn nothing else of positive value from this relationship, except to say: this is how men of a certain class tended to view women of a certain class in a certain period of European history. We are left only with the particulars; the swift stroke of Occam's nominalist razor prevents us from making any assumptions about universal human nature.

But notice what is lost from this quick and easy dismissal. Lost first is the assumption (implicit in the literary tradition of Western Civilization) that great literature can transcend the

particularities of time, place, culture, race, gender and teach us, across these boundaries that would otherwise separate us, something universal about what it means to be human, something that can enrich our lives and our understanding of ourselves.

For instance, Dante's use of Beatrice in The Divine Comedy can be seen as a particular example, and one brilliantly and compellingly developed, of the universal human need for symbols of the transcendent. Such symbols, like the metaphor itself in poetry, mediate the transcendent to the particular, the unfamiliar to the familiar world. In short, we could argue that such hungering for mediation is the root of the religious impulse in human beings throughout the ages, regardless of culture, race, gender, or historical period. In its crudest form, we see this in the idols tribal peoples (of every race) have always made for themselves. In its most refined forms, as I would argue we have in Dante's use of Beatrice, we have a much more complex symbol that, while fascinating in itself, is always pointing beyond itself to the even more remarkable transcendent mystery of which it is a symbol. Beatrice mediates the transcendent mystery of God -- through her beauty, intelligence, love -- but she prevents Dante and us from worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. She becomes a window -- a gloriously decorated window -- through whom we glimpse something, Someone, even more glorious. But, of course, if we approach The Divine Comedy with the presupposition that there is no objective transcendent reality, then we are not in a position to appreciate symbols that purport to mediate the transcendent.

Now let's back up to the beginning of the European literary tradition. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are undoubtedly the foundation upon which classical literature and subsequently all of Western literature built itself. Some would complain that the Iliad is a barbaric beginning for any tradition; and certainly they are right. Homer delights in graphic details of grisly death in battlefield carnage. Heroes decapitate their foes and bowl their heads into the enemy. Victims find themselves disemboweled, holding their entrails in their hands before the mist of death clouds their eyes. Achilleus revels in the shower of blood that spatters him as his horse and chariot trample bodies, while he is "riding for his glory."

The ancient world was barbaric, but that's part of the point. How different are we today? How different has humanity been in any particular time, place, or culture? The amount of bloodletting and the rich variety of death-dealing techniques in the latest Arnold Schwarzneggar film are comparable to that of the Iliad. The audiences in the Roman Colosseum, like the picnic-crowd that went down from Washington to see the Battle of Bull Run, or the couch-potato crowd glued to CNN during the Gulf War, have all somehow enjoyed the repulsion/attraction of human violence. And Leonard Jeffries' distinction between the warlike "ice people" of Europe and the peace-loving "sun people" of Africa simply doesn't hold up. The Zulus (and many other African peoples) have a history as warlike and violent as that of the Greeks.

But that is only part of the story, the darker side of human nature (and I do mean human and not, as some feminists would argue, merely male; women attend Schwarzneggar films in substantial numbers, and not just because they are dragged along by violence-hungry men). The other side of the picture, the spiritual side of human nature, is seen already in the Iliad. The heroes of this war are individuals, each demonstrating what the Greeks called arete, the excellence that distinguished an individual above his or her peers. The Iliad presents a world where individual human beings are fulfilled to the extent to which they are free to express their arete. We have inherited this theme, and the U.S. Army has set it to music: "Be all that you can be, in the Army" -- an apt subtitle for the Iliad and -- if we drop the final phrase -- for all of Western Civilization: "Be all that you can be." To this we direct all of our education, all of our laws and governmental programs, all our churches -- to free the individual to "be all that you can be." Abraham Maslow calls it "self-actualization." Christians phrase it in theological terms: "Be all God created you to be."

This focus on individualism is uniquely Western. We do not find it in the caste system of ancient India or in the Emperor-worship of China, or in the Pharaoh-worship of ancient Egypt. Neither, of course, do we find it fully developed in ancient Greece, for the privilege of self-actualization was not extended to the women or slaves. Nonetheless, even in Homer we find the seeds of what would later flower into a more universal sense of human dignity, freedom, equality, and rights.

In the Odyssey, for instance, the female character of Penelope is developed in much greater detail than in other ancient literature. Sure, one can argue that she is the prototype of the wife who stays at home while her husband is out having all the fun. But such a facile dismissal misses the point that Homer honors Penelope for her intelligence, courage, perseverance, and faithfulness. She is clearly a match for her husband Odysseus, and her plotting at one end, and his plotting at the other end of their separation are equally instrumental in restoring the marriage that was broken by war and fate. This Homeric woman is fully human.

Homer's view of humanity crosses the traditional barriers of class as well as of gender. As Odysseus returns home in disguise as a beggar, he discovers that his most loyal defender during his long absence has been the lowly swineherd, Eumaios. Homer's affection for this character is seen in his use of the recurring phrase: "Eumaios, O my swineherd." Homer honors Eumaios -- little more than a slave -- for his loyalty, courage, intelligence, and compassion, and uses him as a foil for the treasonous noblemen who have pushed themselves as suitors upon Penelope and have stolen Odysseus' food, wine, and maidservants. Eumaios even becomes a kind of father-substitute for a while for Telemachus, before Odysseus reveals himself to his son. This Homeric slave is fully human.

These seeds, planted in the soil of Greek civilization, as similar seeds were planted in the soil of ancient Hebrew

civilization, came to full flower in the Christian era, as Christ clearly and unequivocally extended the vision of full humanity to every human being he encountered, but most explicitly to those excluded by the dominant culture of his day. These were the women, the criminals, the sick and handicapped, the lower class. He insisted that God was no respecter of persons in the sense of privileging some over others and declared that the last shall be first. Every human being was created in the image of God and is therefore worthy of being treated with dignity -- except perhaps those who would deny this dignity to others.

Time does not permit a more comprehensive tracing of this fundamental idea throughout the literary tradition of Western Civilization. Suffice it to say that the entire tradition has nurtured and been nourished by the idea of human dignity, freedom, and equality. From the Epic of Gilgamesh through the drama of Aeschylus and Sophocles, from the poetic theories of Aristotle to the literary theories of Sidney, Johnson, and Coleridge, from the celebration of the spiritual self in Augustine through the complex characterizations of Shakespeare to the great novels of Europe and America, the literature of Western Civilization has always presumed a singular individual who comes to full humanity through confronting moral dilemmas and making choices. The individual does this in the context of a moral universe that sets a universal standard for moral behavior. A single individual comes to know him or herself better through making these choices and experiencing the consequences, whether it be Odysseus choosing to defy the Kyklops

or Macbeth choosing to give in to his "vaulting ambition" or Eve choosing to taste "the fruit of that forbidden tree." The literature of the West presumes a universal human nature.

As Wesley Kort argues in Story, Text, and Scripture, we share narrative form with all cultures and languages, despite differences in language, customs, mores, and values. "The narrative form is shared by all" and is part of our essential, shared humanity (9). Kort's structuralism, of course, is a stance of faith, bolstered though it is by reference to other thinkers and works of literature. But he has the wisdom to see the historically verifiable axiom that "the truths and events that grant a people unity, identity, and orientation are entrusted by one generation to another in narrative form. [This is] important for the individual person as well as for a society" (18).

For Western Civilization, this narrative tradition is a vast and incredibly rich enterprise. As Matthew Arnold in "Preface to Poems" asks, and then answers,

> What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet.

And what, according to Arnold, are the best actions?

> Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them are permanent and the same also. (446)

The patterns of human action and their attendant great emotions,

says Arnold, are universal. They cut across the barriers of gender, race, and class. As he says in "Sweetness and Light," culture "seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere. . . . This is the social idea; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality" (472).

For T. S. Eliot, in his seminal article, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," such an owning of tradition is not "a blind or timid adherence" to the past.

> Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. . . . a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together. (49)

Wesley Kort further argues that narrative "is an articulated belief structure" consisting of "the axiological matters to which tone leads, the ethical or anthropological questions that must be answered by character, the teleological aspects of plot, and the ontological implications of atmosphere" (20). Kort goes on to claim that "narrative plays a liminal or mediating position between ordinary discourse and mystery" and even provides the "soteriological" function of unifying chaotic experience (21).

The Civilization Series at GCC recognizes the "belief structure" implicit in the great works of literature that have shaped Western Civilization, and our goal is unapologetically to

elucidate that belief structure, the implicit, motivating ideas that have shaped the literature and that have in turn shaped the civilization of which they were a part.

Gerald Graff, in Professing Literature, rightly insists that regardless of one's critical perspective, we cannot in the current academic climate escape questions of literary theory. Humanism itself, though it has been hostile to theory, is theory and needs to become conscious (again) of its theoretical foundations. He quotes T. S. Eliot: "the important moment for the appearance of criticism [what Graff calls 'theory'] seems to be the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people." The lack of consensus in our time leads Graff to suggest that even the traditionalists' case will be strengthened by being so "dramatized." "For one thing," he says, "their traditionalism would suddenly begin to stand for something in the eyes of students" (261). He concludes his book by saying that we need to be overt, up-front about our theory, whatever it is (262).

This is exactly what the Civilization Series at GCC is attempting to do. At a time when Western Civilization itself has come under fire as representing only the narrow interests of a privileged, patriarchal, white, Europhiliac elite, we have chosen to affirm "the best that has been thought and said" in that tradition and to demonstrate how "the best" has always risen above the particularities of time, place, culture, gender, race, and class necessary to any work of art to affirm universal truths and

ideals about human nature. We do not insulate ourselves, of course, from the best that has been thought and said in other cultures, but given the constraints of time, and the current political climate in academia, we choose to focus primarily on Western Civilization. For whatever we can learn from other civilizations (and there is much indeed), Western Civilization has much to offer the rest of the world, foremost of which is the ever more clearly defined sense of human equality, freedom, and rights.

In any civilization, one particular tradition must emerge to provide continuity and identity. There must always be a "dominant culture," if you will. Otherwise we descend into the anarchy of tribalism, Balkanization, the Beirut syndrome. At the other extreme, of course, is the oppressive fascism of totalitarianism: of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Saddam Hussein. But between the extremes of Beirut and Baghdad, the West must claim the best of its past, affirm its heritage of self-critical analysis, intellectual curiosity, willingness to examine new ideas, and most of all, human freedom.

The purpose of the Civilization Series at Grove City College is not to whitewash history (racially or morally) or to twist great literature into prooftexts for certain pet theories. It is rather to examine the best that has been thought or written in the West and to deepen our appreciation for how we have arrived where we are as a civilization. This includes the negative with the positive, an ever-increasing awareness of the extent of our failure to

measure up to those ideals that have driven us to develop whatever good we have achieved. This self-critical impetus is itself one of the great goods of Western Civilization and, combined with the ideal of individual human freedom, should ensure that the best of our civilization will continue into the future.

At a time when people around the world have been awakening to the liberating power of such values, have been demonstrating in the streets and lying down in front of tanks to affirm their importance, it is especially important that we in the West affirm the tradition that has given those values clearest expression. The individualism of Odysseus, Achilles, Hector; the moral and spiritual complexities of Orestes, Oedipus, Job, David; the human dignity and the transcendent worth of each individual affirmed so strikingly in the New Testament; the development and refinement of all of these themes in the subsequent classics of Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and others--all of these have contributed to our implicit understanding of human nature. These classics have shaped the West and given us a view of humanity that has sparked the world into a dizzying series of democratic revolutions in recent years.

Regarding this heritage, T. S. Eliot wrote that "some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it" ("Tradition" 52). And sweat for it we must. If we take these values for granted and assume that they will survive without nurture, the next generation may well discover that they have disappeared. The

curricular reforms of the 'nineties must affirm the value of the classics that have given the world the humanistic ideals it has recently come to cherish. As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in the Middle Ages, "we are like dwarves seated on the shoulders of giants. We see more things than the ancients, and things more distant, but this is due neither to the sharpness of our own sight nor to the greatness of our own stature, but because we are raised and borne aloft on that giant mass."

With the increasing threat of curricular reforms that would deemphasize the classics, we in the West are in danger of cutting out from under us the legs of those giants on whose shoulders we sit. Certainly, there is a kind of exhilaration involved in toppling giants. But in this case the cost is great: their fall means our fall. Some may enjoy the freefall for awhile; but rest assured, the fall will end with the hard thunk of reality on the ground of our being. Nature will be avenged. To return to C. S. Lewis' metaphor in the Abolition of Man, we are in danger of sawing off the branch on which we sit. In shaping the curricula of our public schools, we need continually to reaffirm the great trunk from which we have emerged, and the roots that hold it firmly to the ground.

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